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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 002040

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE BOOSTS OPPOSITION CANDIDATES  
AND THE PROCESS

Classified By: Political Counselor Annie Pforzheimer for reasons 1.4 (b)  
) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Karzai's empty podium stood prominently between the twin lecterns of leading opponents Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah at a ground-breaking televised presidential debate in Afghanistan July 23. The debate was somber, issue-focused, and lacking in fireworks, although the moderator had to remind the participants on several occasions to not criticize President Karzai (a ground rule agreed upon in advance). Abdullah's rhetoric was diplomatic, general, and somewhat unemotional in comparison to Ghani's more passionate - yet wonky - call for specific policy options. The overall Afghan reaction was positive for the opposition candidates and the electoral process. Although the popular reaction to each candidate followed mostly predictable lines of supporters and detractors among the political elite, the most important viewers of last night's debate may be the quietest: women and undecided voters. End Summary.

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Debate Optics and Format  
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¶2. (C) President Karzai's refusal to attend Tolo TV's first major presidential debate remained the key topic of the local press and political commentators, seen as underscoring his weakened position and minimal participation in campaign-style electoral politics. Karzai's office issued a statement July 23 saying he would not participate too late, he thought the host channel was biased against him, and he wanted more of his 40 challengers to participate. His empty lectern stood prominently during the debate. The official statement included the offer that Karzai was willing to hold a national debate with his rivals if the discussion were conducted by Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission. Karzai supporter and Hazara Junbesh Party leader Mohammad Mohaqeq told us on July 24 that the debate would not affect people, as most do not pay attention to the debates and "will follow their tribal leaders."

¶3. (C) The debate was similar to U.S. presidential debates, with the moderator asking questions (switching from Dari to Pashtu), while each candidate was given about three minutes to respond. Afghan media have shown many presidential candidate encounters, but they tend to allow one-by-one opportunities for candidates to expound on their platforms. Both candidates in Tolo's debate came across as presidential and both addressed issues in substantive ways, although the debate lacked fireworks in large part because the candidates avoided attacking each other.

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Will the Real Pashtun Please Stand Up?  
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¶4. (C) Abdullah is often depicted as not having any Pashtun credentials despite his father's Pashtun identity. (Note: This is due to his Northern Alliance leadership role, his Tajik mother, and his previous role as a close Massoud

advisor. End Note.) Abdullah received credit from a prominent Pashtun Hamid Gailani (MP, Karzai supporter) who told us that Abdullah had "eloquent and fluent Pashtu." Pashtun local Embassy staff claimed the opposite, saying Abdullah would often use Dari words when speaking Pashtu. The Pashtun MPs were more critical of Ghani, an ethnic Pashtun, considered an outsider here after spending decades overseas. They said Ghani made several Pashtu grammatical errors, and seemed to be "trying too hard" to show his ethnic and tribal connections by wearing a traditional cape and tunic. Abdullah - who is perhaps best known as a mujahadeen fighter - wore a dark suit and tie. Earlier that day, Abdullah picked up some Pashtun political support in the form of minor presidential candidate Haji Nasrullah Baryalai, who announced he was leaving the race and supporting Abdullah.

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Abdullah: Measured, Vague, but Comprehensible to the Public  
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¶15. (C) Abdullah was somber and measured in tone, but was criticized by one of the Tolo TV round-table political commentators MP Abdul Karim Aimaq for offering only "vague answers" especially related to foreign policy. He said this was particularly odd since Abdullah was a former Foreign Minister. However, MP Gailani said Abdullah's message was more comprehensible to the common Afghan. Abdullah made broad, conciliatory remarks on the controversial Durand Line question (the Afghanistan-Pakistan border issue), took a populist tone by advocating bringing foreign troop presence under greater legal control as soon as possible, and

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described his support for a parliamentary system of government that would give power back to the provinces. Abdullah spoke out against civilian casualties, foreign-managed prisons in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's involvement in the armed conflict. He outlined his plan to bring former mujahadeen into the government security forces.

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Ghani: Passionate, Wonky, Appealing to Intellectuals  
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¶16. (C) Ghani articulated specific policy plans in a passionate, yet uncharismatic way, according to several Embassy contacts. He underscored his dedication to national reconciliation and outlined details of his Taliban peace plan. He said Afghanistan needed more cooperation with its neighbors in trade, yet criticized foreign governments for their contributions to conflicts in Afghanistan. His rhetoric was also often populist, as when he promised "one million houses and one million jobs" for the people of Afghanistan. However, MP Isaac Gailani (Pashtun, pro-Abdullah) voiced concern that his often wonky message would be lost on the common man, and that in a country with a low level of public education, boiling down your message is particularly important.

¶17. (C) Chairperson for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission Sima Samar told us she watched the debates with a group of intellectuals, and they all concluded that Ghani "won" the debate. She said he gave excellent specific examples of his economic and security strategy for Afghanistan, noting that the debate was "important for democracy in Afghanistan" although it needed to be "just the beginning."

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Media Reaction Gathering Strength; Future Debates Planned  
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¶18. (C) There has thus far been little to no reaction from local media as no newspapers are published on the Islamic sabbath, but we expect broad coverage, commentary and editorials to begin tomorrow and continue throughout the

week. The television station that aired the debate (Tolo TV) is planning another similar presidential debate, but the date has yet to be determined. Ariana TV has been holding presidential debates with minor candidates every Thursday night, and will continue this primetime elections coverage, possibly with these two candidates. There were public and private viewing parties for the debate, which was carried live on radio as well.

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Will Karzai's Chair Remain Empty?  
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¶9. (C) The empty podium symbolized for many Karzai's on-going refusal to move away from traditional, back-door campaigning with local power-brokers, contrasting with Abdullah and Ghani who engaged directly with the people. Karzai's Political Advisor Sebghatullah Sanjar told us in confidence July 23 that Karzai has been pulling away even from direct engagement with tribal leaders during his back-door negotiations. Sanjar saw a "surprising and unprecedented" development when the Bamiyan leaders came to the palace on July 21. Sanjar said Presidential advisor Daudzai introduced the tribal leaders and said they were "going to offer their support to Karzai." The leaders corrected Daudzai, and said they would consider support, but complained that the Karzai government had done little for their people. When the Bamiyan leaders' complaints ended, and when Daudzai went to get the pay-off from upstairs, Karzai snuck out the back door without shaking their hands.

¶10. (C) Sanjar said Karzai feared questions about his recent political deals with former mujahadeen and other warlords that he formerly denounced, and his government's poor record the last seven years. Ashraf Ghani told us another reason Karzai would avoid a debate is that his Dari and Pashtu are not nearly as fluent as his English.

¶11. (C) The debate had many winners -- both candidates, the voters, and the concept of a campaign of ideas. Contacts noted that until now, only Karzai has had the "presidential" platform and ability to speak directly to the people about the future of the country; when others are able to lay out their visions it may help legitimate the idea that someone else can be president. While the political elites are busy calibrating the highs and lows of the debate, the most important viewers may have been those who are the hardest to read: women, who cannot attend public rallies but may have access to radio and TV, and the significant undecided vote.

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